Preparing a Battalion for Combat:

Combat Leadership Lessons Learned

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EDITOR'S NOTE: This article is the last in a four-part series. The author commanded the 2d Battalion, 14th Infantry, 10th Mountain Division (Light Infantry), in Somalia in late-1993, and wrote the series at the request of the division commander.

The first article in the series, on physical fitness and mental toughness, appeared in the May-June 1995 issue of INFANTRY; the second, on marksmanship, in the July-August issue; and the third, on maneuver live-fire exercises, in the September-October issue.

A battalion and its companies make up the Army's basic family unit. Although soldiers may identify with their division or brigade, they *bond* with their company and battalion; ask a soldier what unit he's in, and the odds are that he'll respond with the company and battalion designation first. It therefore falls to the battalion commander to be the Army's caretaker of this family unit. Because of this extremely close-knit unit organization, a battalion commander is able to directly influence the lives of hundreds of soldiers.

The position demands intimacy. His personal influence on everyone and everything in the unit affects all facets of battalion life. There is little that escapes his personal attention. Indeed, it could be argued convincingly that the personal influence a battalion commander has on his unit is without equal at any other level in the Army. As a consequence, a battalion reflects the standards, the commitment, and the priorities of its commander.

Because of his position as the foremost leader in the organization, a battalion commander is the unit's primary behavioral role model. What he does or fails to do is always in plain view of his subordinates and becomes the subject of much discussion. The responsibility of battalion command therefore carries enormous weight and underlines the importance of doing the right thing.

The combined effects of position and organization force a battalion commander to focus not only on accomplishing the mission but also on *how* it is accomplished. The long-term health and well-being of his unit depend on his ability to balance this dual focus.

These everyday factors are, of course, every bit as relevant—and probably more so—when a battalion is deployed to a theater of operation. Once a battalion is

deployed, soldiers and units live together 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Anything that was working well before deployment requires constant maintenance to sustain, and things that were not working so well get worse.

In an operational theater, the mission can be all-consuming, and the commander must make a concerted effort to maintain his focus on all the other areas that are important to the battalion. But every operational deployment has an end date, and once that date arrives the battalion immediately begins preparing for the next mission. The leadership challenge of battalion command is to finish the first race on a horse that is ready to run the next one.

For these reasons, when the 2d Battalion, 14th Infantry, was alerted for deployment to Somalia, I felt it was important not to limit our focus to the operational domain. When it came to the mission, I was confident that everything we had done in training would serve us well, but our leaders also had to focus on the human dimension.

This article focuses on what I refer to as combat leadership lessons learned from our experience in Somalia—before the battle, during the battle, and after the battle. I will highlight the elements that, in hindsight, I consider the most relevant. Taken together, these are intended to provide a picture of the way we tried to sustain the long-term well-being of the battalion.

Before the Battle

Before our deployment, I gave all the task force officers a handout, which was used in conjunction with an officer professional development class. The text of the handout is reprinted in the accompanying box.

My intent was to reinforce in the minds of the battalion's officers the idea that they had to take a long-term view of the operation. On the basis of the training we had conducted and our past performance, I had no doubt that the battalion would accomplish its mission to a high standard. For the health and well-being of the unit, however, the manner in which we accomplished that mission was also extremely important, and the officers' role in the process was critical.

I thought that, as the mission wore on, it might be easy for officers to lose their long-term focus or become complacent in their duties. I therefore felt it was important to establish a common reference point of expectations up front. Although my discussion was focused at the platoon leader level, this before-the-battle effort was equally applicable to all the other task force officers.

During the Battle

The major lessons that follow were derived from personal experience in the many combat operations the task force conducted during its tour in Somalia. While most of them are not new, they are nonetheless still valid:

- Deploy well forward with your tactical command post. You are not indispensable. If you become a casualty, someone else will step in to take your place. The Army has many qualified people who can do the job.
- Your personal leadership counts. Your behavior in tough situations helps shape and guide the actions of others.
- Listen to the battle around you. What you do not hear is sometimes as important as what you do. Do not rely solely on radio reports. Your experience in training exercises gives you the best feeling for what's going on on the ground when reports tell you differently.
- Think. If you're not doing it, neither is anyone else. Think action, reaction, counteraction. Any decision made in haste will cause needless losses in men and materiel.
- All leaders must stay cool and clear-headed under fire. This takes concentrated effort, and it starts with you.
- Your subordinate leaders need reassurance. Sometimes this takes a gentle form, sometimes not. Everyone knows that accomplishing the mission is the way home. These leaders truly want to do the right thing, but fear and confusion sometimes get in the way.
- Allow no knee-jerk reactions when soldiers are killed or wounded. This is the unfortunate nature of our business; it will happen despite your every effort. Accepting this fact and living with it is difficult.
- Give subordinates the time and space to develop the situation. They have a difficult job to do. Don't badger them with unnecessary reporting requirements. Waiting is the hardest part, particularly when you know your men are dying.
- Remember the Regiment. Many have stood in your shoes before. Don't allow your actions to stain the Colors. After we are gone, the Regiment lives on.

The principles outlined in the Army's doctrine and training system work.

After the Battle

The following lessons learned after the battle are designed to help a battalion commander take stock of himself and his unit as they prepare for the next battle.

- Learn from what you and the unit did, and continue seeking organizational improvement. Do this even if it means changing your personal ways. Actively enforce the after-action review (AAR) process so that good ideas are not stifled at lower levels.
- Keep routine decision making decentralized, and save the important decisions for yourself. Your staff and subordinate leaders need room to take the initiative and work out problems on their own. The better they can do this, the better they can serve you.
- Be tolerant of honest mistakes. Everyone is under stress and trying to do his best. So long as mistakes don't cause casualties or impede mission accomplishment, they probably aren't that important.
- Pace yourself for the long haul. Your battalion needs a commander who is physically and mentally fresh. This includes regular sleep, physical training, hygiene, and relax-

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PERSONAL NOTES FOR OFFICERS

As officers, you are the standard-bearers of the Army's institutional values. Soldiers and noncommissioned officers will take their cues from what you do or say, and from what you do not do or say. Seek excellence in all things, and never let a fault or error pass by you uncorrected.

Have trust and confidence in your chain of command. Once a decision is made, vigorously support it 100 percent. If you hear grumbling in the ranks, put a stop to it immediately. Never do anything to foster the notion that "higher" is screwed up. Remember, you are somebody's "higher" too.

Performance counseling does not stop once the unit arrives in theater. On the contrary, it is more frequent. Performance counseling remains our best available tool for modifying individual behavior that affects unit performance. This task is not delegated below squad leader level. Platoon leaders review every counseling in their platoons. Your notebook becomes your bible.

Training does not stop in theater. You must always have a series of mission-related training scenarios ready to go. Most training will be "opportunity" training. Accept the fact that you will not be popular when you force your unit to do this.

Pre-combat and post-combat checks are standing operating procedure (SOP) in every mission. This task is never delegated below squad leader level.

AARs are conducted upon completion of every mission. Lessons learned are incorporated into SOPs immediately.

The ultimate form of troop welfare is bringing everyone back home alive with all equipment operative.

Establish personal goals for self-improvement, both mental and physical, on this deployment. Encourage your subordinates to do the same.

Pray regularly and get to know your God. Encourage your subordinates to do the same. There are no atheists in foxholes.

Keep a diary. It is a good aid to your professional growth. Encourage your subordinates to do the same.

Maintain your balance and sense of humor. Do not get "stressed out." If you do, you will lose the trust and confidence of your soldiers. Understand the difference between losing your temper and *showing* your temper.

Allow no deviations from the prescribed uniform, ever. Deviations must be conscious decisions by the chain of command based on an analysis of METT-T, not personal whims.

All soldiers perform personal hygiene daily, shaving and brushing teeth as the very least. Squad leaders check; the platoon leader and platoon sergeant verify. No exceptions.

Physical training is conducted daily in accordance with METT-T. Develop a program of standard isometric and manual resistance exercises.

Do not let good performance go unrewarded or poor performance go uncorrected.

Encourage constructive feedback from subordinates on ways to do things better, then send recommendations up through the chain of command. The best solutions often come from the bottom up.

See that weapons and ammunition are cleaned at every opportunity.

Take charge of all Government property in sight. There is always something that needs to be checked or verified.

Stop rumors immediately and ruthlessly. Do not allow the morale of your unit to rise and fall on the basis of the latest rumor. If you don't hear it from the chain of command, it's not true.

We are a combat organization, expert in the controlled application of violence. Follow your instincts; they are probably right. The chain of command will support you. Maintain patient aggressiveness in your platoon. Be decisive, and execute with unrelenting fury.

ation. If you don't maintain your balance, neither will your battalion.

• Don't let the operational tempo make you lose sight of everything else. Lots of other things still demand your attention—awards, punishments, promotions, rear detachment, family support group, maintenance, mess hall.

• Stay visible and approachable to soldiers. Do routine management by walking around to keep your finger on the pulse.

• Make every effort to keep rumors in check, both at home and in theater. Write a monthly newsletter to dependents. Send videos to the family support group. Routinely meet with companies to dispel groundless rumors.

• Maintain your perspective and sense of humor. Not everything is serious. If you don't laugh very often, chances are no one else does either. And units that don't laugh, even at themselves, have big problems.

It is almost impossible to overstate the effect a battalion

commander has on his unit. While accomplishing the mission will always be his paramount consideration, it cannot be his only one. Fulfilling his role as caretaker of the Army's basic family unit demands a balanced approach to command. For sustained operations, the battalion must maintain its health over the long term. It is therefore important to keep an eye on how the battalion accomplishes the mission.

The items listed here reflect the approach to this challenge that the 2d Battalion, 14th Infantry, used during its tour in Somalia. They are not all-inclusive lists. And there are plenty of areas in which we probably could have done better. But these points and suggestions worked for us.

Conclusion

Any battalion in the Army can be truly great, whether it's a combat, combat support, or combat service support unit. By focusing on high performance in several fundamental areas that are critical for success in combat, a battalion commander can significantly increase the overall capability of his unit.

The principles outlined in the Army's doctrine and training system work. They have shaped an Army that is the world's best. The levels of individual and unit performance throughout the Army are solid. Consequently, most battalions are pretty good by any measure, but there is always room for improvement.

Every unit has several fundamental areas of individual and collective endeavor that are critical to anything the unit will ever be called upon to do in combat, regardless of the conditions. These areas are the essential characteristics that define the unit. I call them unit core performance areas.

Commanders can achieve high performance in their core areas with only a small increase in effort, about ten percent. But getting this ten percent requires commanders to maintain a long-term focus on their core performance areas that does not change in the face of competing demands. Core performance areas must constantly be integrated as sub-tasks or conditions in everything the unit does. They must then be reinforced at every opportunity by all the institutional weight the chain of command can bring to bear.

My professional experience convinced me that there were three fundamental areas that defined the essence of a light infantry battalion, and these became the core performance areas for the 2d Battalion, 14th Infantry: Physical fitness and mental toughness, marksmanship, and realistic maneuver live-fire exercises.

We maintained a constant focus in these areas, both at home station and in theater. Our aim was to find the extra ten percent that would make us high performers in each of them. Getting the extra ten percent did not require a major overhaul of the unit. The key was thoughtful, fine-tune adjustments in what the unit trained on and in the way training was conducted.

Actively enforce the after-action review (AAR) process so that good ideas are not stifled at lower levels.

When a unit achieves high performance in its core areas, it gets an additional payoff of tremendous proportions. Because the core performance areas are at the heart and soul of the unit, their combined action powers performance in other important areas as well. The result is a supercharged unit with far greater capabilities.

Adopting this philosophy in training paved the way for the 2d Battalion's performance in all of its combat operations in Somalia. The battalion got more than its extra ten percent in each of its core performance areas. As a result, it was a high-energy, high-performance outfit across the board.

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